

>> Some items stirred repressed emotions, like the Lexington police cap still coated with the thick layer of white dust that had covered the city. Or a single piece of unwritten letterhead, its edges burned, bearing the Fuji Bank logo with its address, 2 World Trade Center, a building that was no more.

As Welsh sat in his living room, fingering the gloves and brushing the dirt from his cap, each item brought to him a story. Memories of the people he met, the things he saw, and the tears that were shed.

One week after al-Qaida terrorists flew two jet airliners into the 110-story

buildings, Welsh, who also served Lexington as the head of its Critical Incident Stress Management Team, was asked to travel the 700-mile journey to New York to help his fellow public servants in distress. While he will tell you his service there was minimal, Welsh's reminiscing about the people he met tells otherwise. His stories about the survivors, who shared with him their wounds and how their lives had been ripped apart much like the marred steel they were there to work through, speak volumes about the roles he played.

What were you doing when the first plane struck the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001?

We had a rock and roll band of police officers — the DARE 911 Band — and we played at schools and stuff. We were at rehearsal that morning and Officer Debbie Wagner, who was in community services at the time, her phone rang. Her husband told her an airplane had hit the World Trade Center. And we were thinking, 'Oh, some poor guy in a Cessna got off track.' We really didn't think much more about it. We kept rehearsing, then he called her back and said another plane hit the World Trade Center. Then the room just took on a whole different feel. All units were put on alert and we all took off out of there. I remember that very distinctly.

Was there a difference after the attacks that you noticed in your agency or co-workers?

Absolutely. We were all on alert, because at that time we were all asking, 'Is another attack imminent? Are these going to happen all over the United States?' I remember everybody being on edge.

How were you selected to assist at Ground Zero following the attacks?

I got a phone call two days later asking if I would be willing to come to New York and help out. To this day I can't tell you exactly how that happened or how they knew about me. It was not because I was a chaplain, but because I was part of a critical incident stress management team. I went up on Sept. 19 and worked for a little more than two weeks. I didn't know much about anything before I got there. They just told me what to pack, what to bring — it was one short phone call. I had to get permission from the chief, then when I got up there, I literally hit the ground running.

What was your response after getting this phone call asking you to drive to New York to help after the terrorist attacks?

I couldn't believe it. First of all, that they had just found me. The first phone call I



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

◀ John Welsh talks about the thick dust that lingered in the air around Ground Zero, that even 10 years later still is embedded in the fibers of his Lexington Police cap.